



Group of four. 2005. Salt-glazed stoneware. Tallest 32 cm/h.

Ruth King - Salt-glaze Potter A Quiet Dynamic

Article by Lyn Wait

ENTERING A CERAMICS FAIR LAST YEAR IN LONDON I was struck by the form and composure of Ruth King's salt-glazed pots. Their difference and strength were immediately apparent. A friend accompanying me endorsed my view that these pieces were the ones that held the eye as we gathered in the various works displayed in the room. King's pots hold the attention equally as a collection as they do individually. They enhance one another and the profile and space occurring between the positioned shapes adds strength to their line and form.

These pieces were some of the first in the current body of work that King has been developing over the past two years. There is a steadiness about them, not

only in their finish but also in their form. It is important to King that the making of a pot is a tactile experience to the extent that during its making she will lift it and cradle it, turning it in her lap to gently mould and shape the form.

Before building the form, a base is cut, upon which she attaches the body of the pot. Each pot begins from a similar starting point and will evolve differently to the next. The body of the pot is made from a single piece of clay that is wrapped around and the top is the third and final piece to be added. The pots are coaxed through gradual manipulation to adopt their varying forms. The opening, itself an important feature, is carefully cut and modelled.

For nearly 20 years King has lived in North Yorkshire, UK, in a village on the outskirts of the city of York. A student of the '70s at Camberwell School of Arts and Craft, her career spans 30 years and throughout that time her dedication to her work has remained undiminished. While at Camberwell, Ewen Henderson introduced her to Japanese pottery of the Neolithic pre-historic Jomon period. These forms made a lasting impression on her. Much of the bold applied decoration of her work in the '80s, as well as echoing early Celtic designs, reflects the strong sculptural qualities of these handsome Japanese artifacts with their applications of handles and feet. These influences remain.

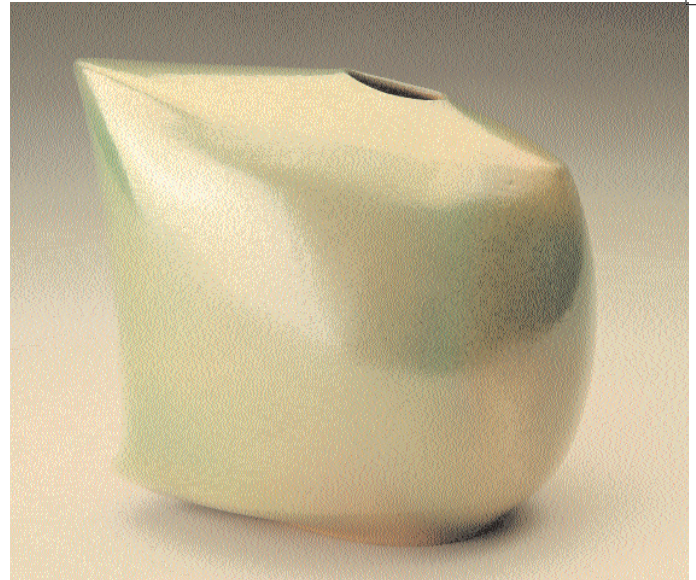
She uses a gas fired kiln, yet her combination of techniques is unusual for salt-glazing. There is also the potential for pots to lose their shape or centre of balance during the rigours of the firing. Her contribution to the discipline is that she demonstrates the possibility of being able to control the form without jeopardising the result.

King's pots essentially have three seams at which lie the points of stress. Often the foot is small in proportion to the expanse of clay above it. The balance she manages to create in the pieces is contrasted within the difficulty of the making. Putting these carefully constructed objects into the salt kiln demands an understanding of the power of failure contrasted with the hope for a successful outcome.

The small delicately-made lidded pieces and tall simple vases of the '90s gradually gave way to this new approach. The past few years have resulted in the form becoming sensual and sophisticated, the scale gradually increasing and the method of structure dynamic. There is finesse in both making and in finish. The glazes have become richer, achieving a range of colour through soft iridescent greens, golds, browns to black.

It is perhaps unsurprising to know that some of these pots, handled tenderly at the stage long before they are dry, are variously described by others as being like cushions or pillows in their finished state. Looking at these finished pieces, one is aware of the feeling in their making, and we are at once respectful of their dignity and warmed by their lightness of touch. King's early work experimented with bold flamboyant gestures that referred to natural plant forms, reminding us that while clay might be of the same soft and dispersible nature as seed pods, once fired it establishes a sense of presence, permanence and structural impact.

The energy and vitality of these pieces demonstrated King's enthusiasm and exuberance. Some of her pots have been described as dancers that move vigorously while held within an all-in-one-suite. This echoes King's own description of something in movement caught just at the point of pausing



2005. Salt-glazed stoneware. 21 cm/h.



2005. Salt-glazed stoneware. 26 cm/h.

before moving off again swiftly – “like a skateboarder at the top of the wall”. Within this description there is a sense of suppressed amusement and a gentle nod towards the spontaneous pen of the animator. In making these forms King tries to use as few gestures as possible – akin to something either drawn or quickly modelled; a drawing that succeeds with the least possible lines.

Ruth King makes pots that provoke contrasting reactions, they embody a range of sentiments and they merit quiet contemplation. A love for her material and craft has enabled her to produce an extensive body of work over the years. The valuable contribution she continues to make as a fine salt-glaze artist potter, exemplified by this new work, earns her a place among the best of her contemporaries.

Lyn Wait is an artist and writer living and working in the north of England. Photography Chris Mason.